

PRIMITIVE BEASTS



CANDYCHAMELEON

TRANSFORMERS BEAST WARS FANZINE



A TRANSFORMERS BEAST WARS ZINE

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BEAST WARS



EPIC TALES FROM THE
ANIMAL KINGDOM!















Y'KNOW...WE COULD ALWAYS
LEAVE THE KID. I'M SURE HE CAN
HANDLE HIMSELF FOR A BIT.

MMHM.

COME ON! I HEARD IT
BUILDS CHARACTER.



...I'M NOT HEARIN' A "NO".

DON'T BE SO HARD
ON CHEETOR.

HE'S A YOUNG BOT.
AND EVERYTHING'S FUN
WHEN YOU'RE YOUNG.

YOUNG N' STUPID,
YOU MEAN.

HMPH. YOU'RE STILL ONE
OF THOSE, RATRAP.

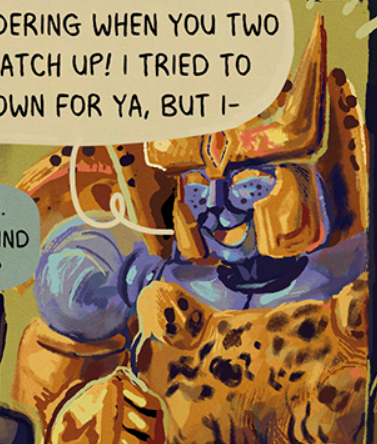


OH! AND HERE I
THOUGHT I WAS THE
WISE GUY.



NOW, I CAN'T LET YOU
HAVE ALL THE FUN.

HEY
BOYS



I WAS WONDERING WHEN YOU TWO
WOULD CATCH UP! I TRIED TO
SLOW DOWN FOR YA, BUT I-

EASY, KIDDO.
WHAT'D YOU FIND
OUT THERE?

...I TOLD YOU WE
SHOULD'A LEFT THE KID

STEP



OH RIGHT!

SHUT UP, RATTRAP.



COME ON! PROMISE I'LL
KEEP PACE THIS TIME.

HEY! YA SURE
IT'S SAFE? A
PRED COULD-

100% POSITIVE! BESIDES,
THE THREE OF US CAN
HANDLE ANY PRED!

FINE, FINE, BUT IF WE GET IN
TROUBLE I'M NOT CALLING
THE BOSS FOR HELP.



SEE, SEE? ISN'T IT
THE BEST?



GOTTA HAND IT
TO YA, KID...

THIS IS ONE HECKUVA
VIEW YOU FOUND.



WHAT'S YER
VERDICT, RHINOX?

CAN'T ARGUE WITH
THAT, OLD PAL.

#REMEMBER WHEN

BY EERIAN SADOW

I served with all these guys, back when we were stranded on ancient Earth and later. I'm the only one of us left, now, but I thought their words should be remembered and their memories honored. With help from some friends, I'm adding the records that survived what became known as the Beast War and Megatron's takeover of Cybertron afterward.

Dinobot said we should tell the story true, and nothing is more true than their own journals, recorded not long after we crashed. Sometimes I'm amazed any of us survived, especially me.
-Cheetor, Maximal Elder

CHIEF ENGINEER RHINOX'S LOG, UNKNOWN DATE, UNKNOWN LOCATION

Sending the Axalon to chase after Megatron ended worse than I predicted. I knew it would be a disaster, but I didn't think that "disaster" meant being flung through a space-time rift and dumped on a planet that doesn't even have sapient life on it. Or if it does, they're very well hidden.

And since then it's just been one frag up after another, with the ship being broken beyond repair, the kid trying to get himself killed by running off alone and the Preds surviving their own crash. And then, just to make things even harder, Optimus has gone and adopted one of them.

"He'll die out there alone," he said to me. "He's not equipped for survival someplace like this. Megatron will hunt him down!"

Or my personal favorite, "He's not one of them anymore, Rhinox."

Yeah, the Pred might not be part of Megatron's crew anymore, but he's still a Pred. I'm starting to feel a little like Rattrap, cause I think this is going to get us all killed.

But he's Optimus and I trust him, so I'm going to try and keep that to myself. And it's a better use of my time to try and figure out where and when we are so we can get home, than worrying over Dinobot killing us in our recharge.

But first, I've got to figure out how to keep our communication systems functional in the energon soup out there, because Cheetor will run off again like the hot headed kid he is, and I don't want him to die. Because between the Preds and the energon, that's more likely than I want to think about. For all of us.

Frag me, maybe we are all gonna die.

RATTRAP'S LOG, MIDDLE OF THE NIGHT WHEREVER WE ARE

I didn't sign up for any of this. All I wanted was to see the universe, get paid and go back home. Maybe do a little bit of scientific documentation, maybe a little bit of something else. But no. We had to get tangled up with a bunch of Preds and then get stranded on some rock with a broken ship and no supplies.

Oh, and a bleeding spark for a commander who went and adopted one of the Preds!

If this gets us killed, and it probably will, I'm gonna be real slagged off.

COMMANDER'S LOG, OPTIMUS PRIMAL, MAXIMAL SHIP AXALON, UNKNOWN PLACE, UNKNOWN TIME

Well, Rhinox was right. This mission did nothing but turn into an unprecedented disaster.

We followed our orders to engage Megatron and attempt to retrieve the Golden Disc. We did the best we could, and ended up with the majority of our crew in stasis pods in orbit around this unknown planet while we fell through a space time anomaly and crashed. And so did Megatron and his Predacons. I wish I could say that this has resulted in peace and mutual cooperation so that we can all go home, but Megatron attacked us immediately upon realizing we were there.

My only consolation is that one of their number has... well, not seen the light, exactly. But he has seen fit to join us, at least for now. His name is Dinobot and his presence and knowledge of Megatron's tactical thinking (which is none as far as I can tell) will help turn the tide whenever we must fight. He is an honorable mechanism, for whatever value of honor we'll get out here, and seems willing to listen to my commands after our rocky start.

And it was a very rocky start.

I sincerely hope that he and my crew will learn to get along quickly, though. I cannot have him and Rattrap fighting over every possible insult or implied threat. And I am afraid that if Cheetor antagonizes him too much, Dinobot will simply give in to his Predacon nature and eat him. Rhinox at least seems able to behave like a mature mechanism, though I know him well enough to know that he doesn't trust Dinobot any more than the others do.

Unfortunately I have to let the personnel issues work themselves out, because we have to find supplies, repair the ship, detain the Predacons, retrieve the Golden Disc and get home. If we can.

This is a real mess, and I can only hope that in the future when we're old and faded, we'll look back on these first few days on our temporary home with laughter. Or at least optic rolls.

DINOBOT'S JOURNAL, UNKNOWN DATE, UNKNOWN LOCATION

The Maximal leader has given me this log book and suggested I record my thoughts for posterity. What posterity he believes there will be, for either of our groups eludes me, especially now, but the Maximals do like their histories in text form. The mere thought makes me miss the songs of my own people already.

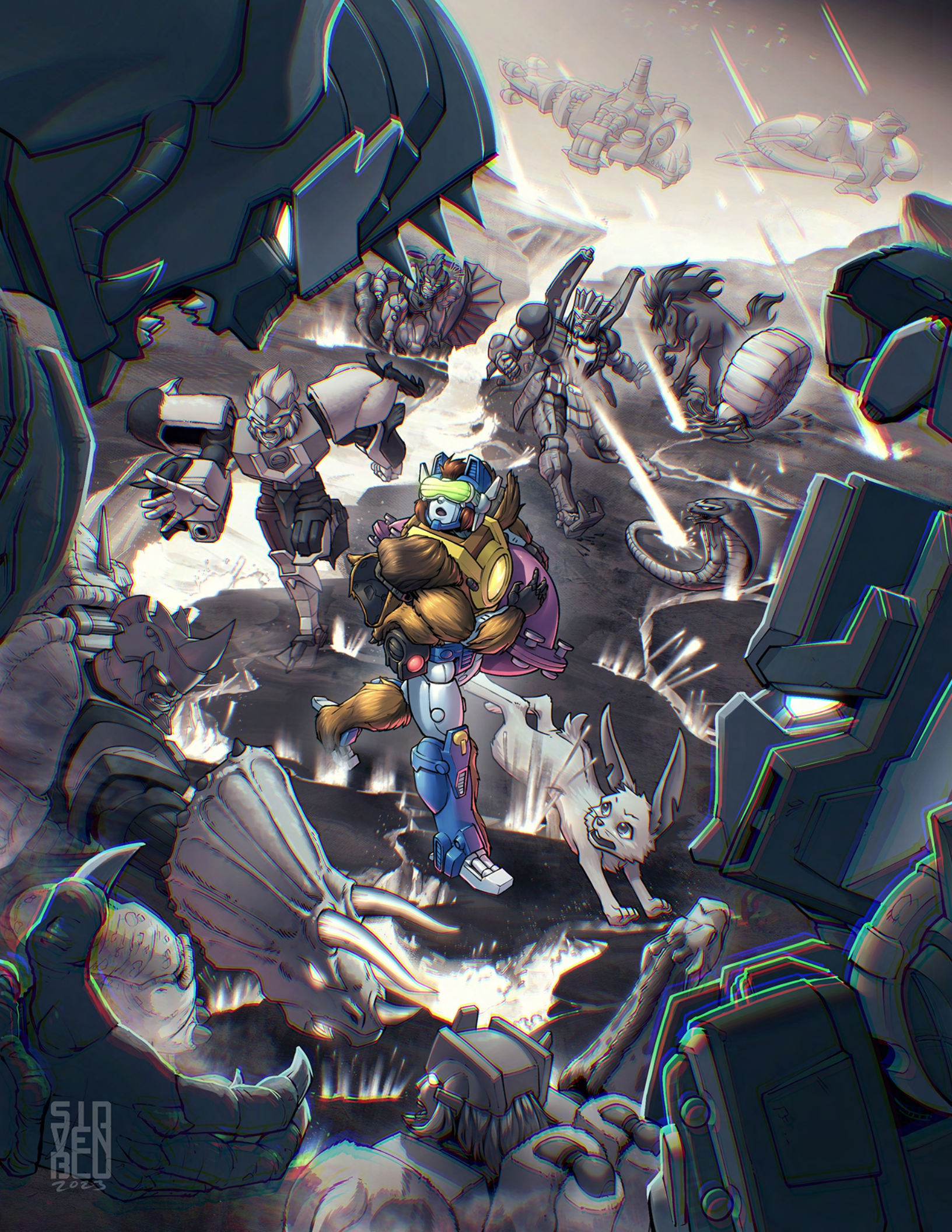
I am no poet, however, so I will do as he suggests. For now.

I have long been disappointed in Megatron and unhappy with his leadership. He fails, repeatedly, to live up to his namesake and has done nothing to truly help our people prosper and thrive. My frustration boiled over after we crashed on this unknown planet and I challenged him for leadership. Unsurprisingly, I was betrayed and defeated by treachery, and forced into exile. A wiser mech might have accepted that as a sign, but I have been a fool.

A fool to join Megatron, a fool to stay on the Darksyde and a fool to attempt to overthrow both Megatron and the Maximal commander.

After watching Optimus, a mere scientist, fight Megatron hand to hand, I know now that I had little chance of victory, even if Scorpionok had not interfered. And yet, the Maximal has seen fit to grant me shelter and a place among his crew. And while the other Maximals do not trust me, nor I them, perhaps this will give me the time to develop the strength necessary to finally overthrow Megatron.

That, or I will die among them as the fool I have shown myself to be.













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RISE OF THE SCREAMER

Hasta La Vista~
PRIMAL





COWARD OF THE COUNTY

BY KOTA

"It's because no one likes either of you," Blackarachnia had explained, sneer fixed perfectly in place and posture purposefully relaxed. Not that the show of bravado helped her any—even if she weren't *just* out of arm's reach with multiple avenues of escape at her disposal, Rampage would still know by the way that fear crackled through her circuits, the suppressed creaky strain it took to stay still when he stepped closer. "And we figured that if you decide to go on a spree, Quickstrike's not the worst loss."

There were many ways Rampage could have responded, but demanding to know what made *Waspinator* a preferable patrol partner over himself implied something about his situation that he didn't care to interrogate.

And so Rampage was resigned to watching the only other member among this sorry band of fools less appreciated than himself scuttle headfirst into a herd of elephants with a whoop.

"C'mon, c'mon!" A bolt of plasma struck the dirt in a messy spray, causing the elephants to flinch back as Quickstrike hollered and clacked his claws. Despite all the noise and violent prancing, the elephants were slow to scatter and shy to defend themselves against the assault. One elephant was even careful enough to step over him, however desperately he tried to keep up. "Ya cowards, put 'em up!"

In a desperate bid to accomplish whatever it was he thought he was accomplishing, Quickstrike lunged directly into the middle of the pack, tail hissing and snapping at the thick range of legs. That jolted the herd into action, more eager to be rid of the pest bounding about underfoot—it also earned Quickstrike a kick to the head, spinning him through the air until his back smacked into the ground. The elephants paraded off to better pastures, leaving Quickstrike to curse and jerk his spindly legs in the air.

"Fraggin'—*Maxies*," Quickstrike snarled, rocking back and forth on the flat of his back, resorting to a clumsy transformation to get him back up to his peds. He stomped around in a petulant circle, dirt puffing out from where it had gotten stuck between his plates and settling in reddish-brown streaks down his armour.

With nothing better to do, Rampage ambled closer, observing the elephants' retreat. "I wasn't aware that seeing you humiliated by a gang of pachyderms was a part of the Maximal stratagem."

No response—no retort, or boast, or demand to explain what a pachyderm was. Rampage glanced downwards, where Quickstrike stared moodily out onto the savannah. For a mech who earned his rank among the Predacons in part for never shutting up, that wasn't concerning. Unusual, if anything.

But not unexpected, perhaps. Rampage recognized the restless buzz of energy, all whipped up and left to cycle over and over through wires and circuitry. Nowhere to go and nothing to do, except pick inconsequential fights and get scrapped for it.

With a considering grunt, Rampage hoisted his rocket launcher, aimed it at the pack, and fired.

He didn't bother watching to ensure it landed—but between Quickstrike's startled holler and the panicked blaring as the elephants took off at a run, it seemed to miss the mark. This wretched planet was taking its toll. If nothing else, it looked as though the pack had crowded into themselves, their pace limping despite the alarm.

"What in tarnation...!" When hopping in place didn't get him a clearer view of the hobbling pack, Quickstrike finally turned to face Rampage properly. And promptly punched him in the knee. "What'd you go and do that for?!"

Rampage quirked an optic ridge. "Oh, so you're the only one who can take their boredom out on the local wildlife?"

"*Yer chasing them off!*" Quickstrike punched him again, for all the impact it made. "They ain't gonna square off now!"

"They weren't 'squaring off' in the first place."

"Maybe if you bothered to *hit one of 'em—!*"

Quickstrike cut himself off with a strangled groan, curling into himself and twisting away. Silence fell, stretched. And Rampage didn't appreciate it; he would prefer moving on with their patrol so that he could go back to hiding away in the *Darksyde* and plotting how to retrieve his spark. But then again, returning to the base might mean having to be in the audience of Megatron's grandstanding and endless whinging.

So Rampage remained, listening to the frantic trumpeting of the elephant band fade into the distance, as Quickstrike gathered his thoughts in bits and pieces.

Several moments hung between them before Quickstrike spoke again. "If you'd got one of them," he said slowly, as if the scope of the hypothetical might overload his whirring little processor, "you reckon those critters would come back for a fight? Avenge their compadre?"

Rampage had to do a double-take, ensure that it was still simple, savage Quickstrike, with all the capacity for reflection available in his stunted frame, asking for the perspective of another living being.

He considered ignoring the question, leaving the fuzor to struggle with his thoughts. "They have a certain intelligence," he said instead. "They experience sorrow, concern for their fellows. But they're also fearful, the way all uncomplicated creatures are. Why pursue vengeance when they could die as well?"

Quickstrike nodded absent-mindedly. "So the Maxies are just a buncha dumb elephants then, yeah?"

Now he had to take a second glance at the pack, baffled. "Are you being metaphorical, or is there a Maximal no one told me about?"

Remarkably, that seemed to ease Quickstrike's gloominess. With a snort, he relaxed. "Naw, just. Reckoned the Maxies would be gearing up for a proper fight, after what happened to their pal. Dunno what has 'em all bush up—oughta be out here fighting for him, right?"

Rampage scoffed. "As if you know so much about how Maximals grieve."

"*Haw!*" This time when Quickstrike punched Rampage, it was the kind of friendly tap between comrades, too light for Rampage to feel.

"Figure all 'em sappy bits fell outta me when I ended up here, I ain't gonna know. Still, you'd think the Maxies would wanna do somethin'. What, you know any better?"

Maximal-born, Maximal-made, both isolated from what that meant—a fine pair they made, to try and scrutinize the obscurities of programming. Rampage knew he was a lost cause, would outlive his creators and never care. And however much Quickstrike tried to buddy up with the rest of the Predacons, his scrambled circuits and empty history lent him no instinct for grief.

But Rampage had one advantage over Quickstrike. A *squish-crunch* sense of memory, of earth wet with plasma smeared grittily across his plating, gore clotting in his joints. Of fear and despair heaped onto the shoulders of a survivor who could carry it. May still be carrying it, still crying for execution the same as Rampage left him.

"You're not wrong, I suppose," Rampage murmured. "If they truly cared, they'd do something about it. Seek a fight. Put it all on the line in a bid for vengeance. Yes, that would be the truest expression of grief."

"Heh, and I s'pose you're up to trap on all that then?"

Rampage huffed. "I have some experience, yes."

Quickstrike nodded, then sighed. "Well, that don't exactly do a thing for me right now, does it? Can't have a proper tussle if they ain't gonna wake snakes."

"There'll be other battles," Rampage said. A neutral fact, not a reassurance. Inevitability, not encouragement. "The Maximals can't lick their wounds forever, the violence will start again. It will always start again."

"Want it *now*," Quickstrike grumbled, petulant. He even kicked the dirt, all morose and pathetic.

Feeling rather put upon by all this, Rampage looked out to the landscape, as if that might hold the answers to getting out of this strange little spark-to-spark. To his rare fortune, it did.

"We're already off schedule for this patrol. If we catch up to those beasts and we get them riled up enough, would that get you to stop whining?"

Quickstrike perked up. "You reckon you could get 'em in proper fighting form?"

"We'll see," Rampage muttered, quickly transforming into tank mode and driving off before Quickstrike could clamber on. That couldn't dash Quickstrike's rising spirits as he skittered after him, cheering and hooting the whole way.

(Hundreds of miles away, lost and wedged into a cliffside tomb, a stasis pod malfunctioned and sparked.)







BEASTWARS

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The background of the menu is a dark, stylized illustration of a jungle at night. A large, muscular, brown and black robotic character with a purple cape (Megatron) stands on the right. In the center, a smaller, more complex robot (Optimus Prime) is visible. The scene is lit with a greenish-yellow glow from a light source above. In the foreground, there are silhouettes of a large hand and a snake. The menu options are displayed in a glowing yellow font with a black outline.

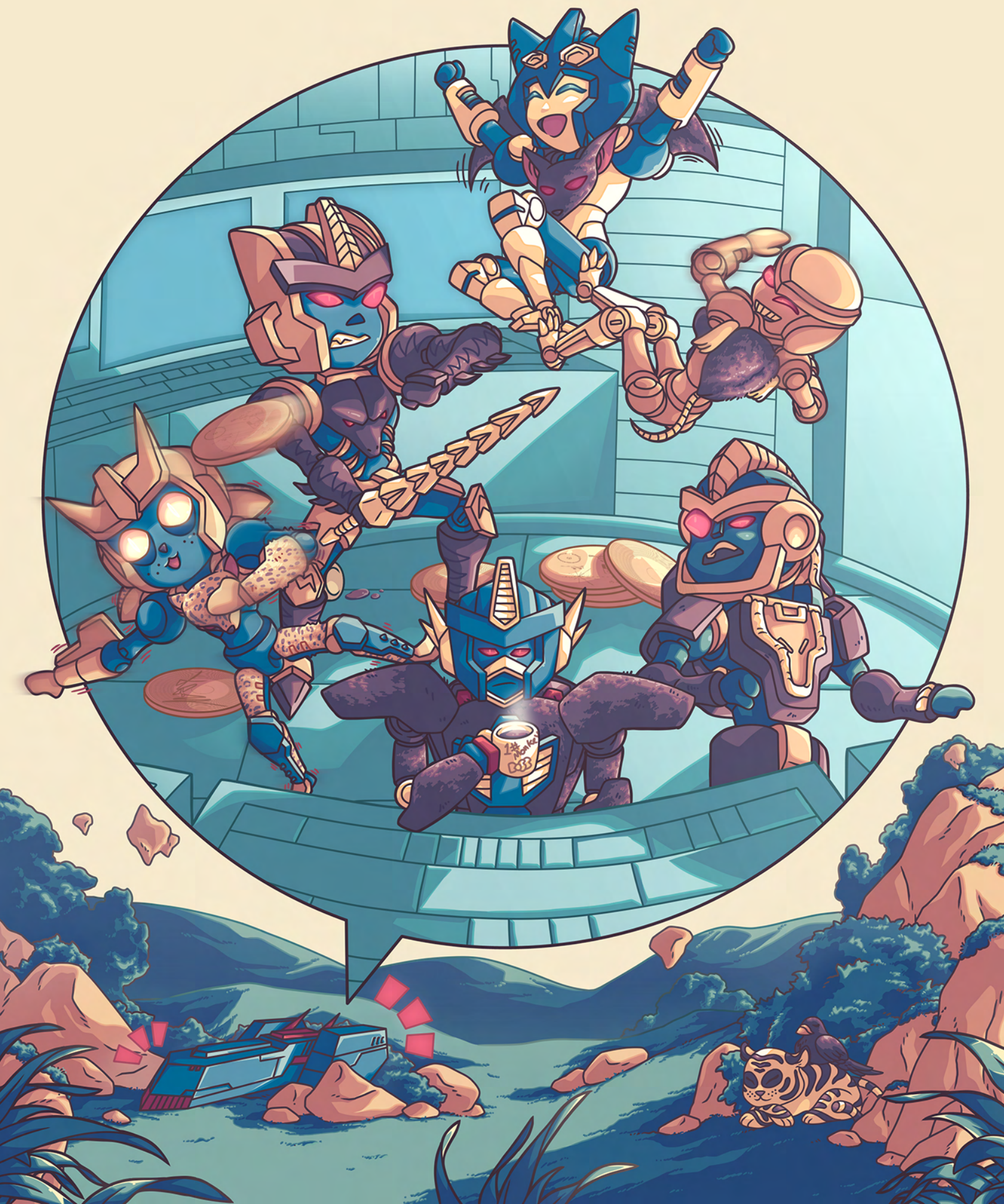
>NEW GAME
CONTINUE
EXTRAS
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WEAVING ANIMOSITY

BY CURSE

Tarantulas did not need much to spark his curiosity.

It was, after all, in his nature to probe. And so many of the Predacons he was stranded with were so shallow, so painfully banal, that even the slightest glimmer of something truly interesting was enough to set his processor ablaze.

Needless to say, Tarantulas had a hunch.

Well, he had many hunches. The art of anticipation was a fine skill necessary for both science and espionage. But no amount of meticulous briefing and research could cobble together the puzzle he had before him.

Megatron. So deceptively simple: an overambitious warmonger who must be neutralized at all costs.

That was what the Tripredacus Council thought. And, for all intents and purposes, that sort of simple logic sufficed, because the Tripredacus Council were also just as simple.

Ravage didn't *know* Megatron. Not this one, anyway.

Presently, Tarantulas drums on the keypad before him with quick claws, pulling up the newest energon reading that the sensors outside his lair scanned.

"Business as usual," he says to no one.

Did anyone really know Megatron? Tarantulas didn't dabble in the delusion that even he had all the facts, regardless of how trivial it had been to infiltrate and climb the ranks. Megatron was cagey where it counted; though it seemed like the Predacon overlord was all-too-eager to wax poetic about his latest triumphs, Tarantulas sensed a malicious depth to him, and he was confident both Maximal and Predacon were none the wiser.

Except, perhaps, for that honor-bound *thief*...

Tarantulas clicks newly Transmetal chelicerae together as an idea takes root, and with a few quick strokes of the keyboard, new topographic and thermal maps populate the screen.

[PROVIDING COORDINATES . . .]

Satisfied at his fill of data, he announces to his empty lair: "Blackarachnia, you seem quite bored."

The internal webbing that is their psychic data link eliminates the need for speaking, but Tarantulas enjoys the sound of his own voice. His processor quivers in delayed response as Blackarachnia, kilometers away, attempts to block out his words from her own processor – in vain, naturally.

Her mental reply is sharp and icy: *What do you want.*

"What~? You don't want to chat?"

No.

Tarantulas tunes his internal sensors to Blackarachnia's optic feed to see, through her eyes, what she is doing: patrol of the perimeters, per Megatron's asinine schedule.

"Hyeh-hyeh, you wound me..." He stifles another snicker as her instantaneous desire to do just that travels down the web. "Though I'm afraid you haven't much choice today. I've got a far better job for you than mindless patrol."

Blackarachnia groans. *Just get on with it.*

"How do you feel about Dinobot?"

I don't.

"Oh?"

I mean—he's annoying, I guess... definitely not a looker... Ugh! I get the feeling you're trapping me...

"A psychic link is a two-way feed," Tarantulas says cheerily, "though, of course, I *like* you to feel my intentions!"

You're revolting.

"Flattery will get you nowhere, my dear. Regardless! I suspect our cold-blooded traitor may be of great use to us in locating the Golden Disks—since you salvaged *nothing* from Megatron's files..."

Tarantulas senses that Blackarachnia is trying to disengage, but he presses on, twisting deeper into their link: "If you follow these coordinates, you should find the bot himself. Why don't you bring him back here for a little reunion?"

You want me to take down Dinobot and drag him all the way to you? Pass.

"You're not confident in your abilities?" Tarantulas asks innocuously.

I'm not an idiot, Blackarachnia huffs. Those grizzled warrior types are bad news, and I'm not looking to stay in the CR chamber for megacycles again.

Dinobot certainly had a ferocity that rivaled Tarantulas's own cruelty—something Tarantulas was more than acquainted with, having been on the receiving end of said ferocity more times than he'd like.

Besides, I'm not just gonna blindly stumble into danger. You'll have to give me a little more info about what we're doing here.

"I don't *have* to give you anything," Tarantulas corrects, "but maybe if you ask nicely..."

Blackarachnia scoffs.

"... Then I won't override your circuits and *force* you! Hyeh-hyah-hyah!"

Silence falls, and for a brief moment all that is perceivable is the swell of hatred pulsing from her end of the link.

Fine. Whatever. Maybe he can put me out of my misery.

"That's the spirit~! Let me know when you've made contact."

Though his creation was far from perfect—and indeed, a personal failure on many levels – Tarantulas often found it unnecessary to keep constant tabs on her; the mere threat of his omnipresence was enough to ensure obedience.

So, for now, he leaves Blackarachnia to her own devices to focus on the most pressing alert pinging his processor: Where had Dinobot taken the Golden Disks? Had he destroyed them? Tarantulas doubts that. In many ways, Dinobot fell into predictable patterns.

Though that blasted lizard had been miserable to work with from the beginning, Tarantulas could acknowledge that he, like Megatron, was not nearly as transparent as their fellow Predacons. Caggy and violent with a misplaced sense of twisted honor—and an apparent closeness to Megatron shared by no one else. Tarantulas had no doubts that whatever lurked in Dinobot's core consciousness was vital intel for the machinations he had in store, even if the Disks were destroyed.

...And if he were to recover the Disks, what of Megatron? Loathe as he was to admit it, their fearless leader was cunning, far more than Tarantulas had been willing to consider when he first infiltrated the ranks. Pull away the veneer of arrogance, of irritating simplicity, and there was something dangerous coursing within those tantalizing fuel lines–

I can hear you, you know, the witch announces snidely. Two-way feed.

Tarantulas takes a moment to restring the web of their link so that she does not slip through unnoticed again.

Yes, he was being careless indeed. But how could he resist? There was an intoxicating thrill to being bold in his treachery. And in his odder proclivities.

Besides, Blackarachnia meant nothing in the grand scheme of things. Her disloyalty was not nearly as refined as his own, making her more hazardous an asset than valuable; nevertheless, Tarantulas was not one to throw his toys away before they had served their purpose.

"We spiders ought to stick together, right, *partner?*" Tarantulas says, idly observing a new line of data flash across his screen.

A wave of palpable disgust travels down the link. Through the psychic feed from Blackarachnia's optics, he can see that she has frozen at his direct address.

I'd sooner be stuck with Waspinator, she hisses.

"Oho? Certainly that can be arranged!"

He watches in amusement as her claws twitch toward her internal weapon. Her passing consideration of ending it all makes him snicker.

Just leave me alone already. I'm busy and tired of listening to your insane inner monologue. I mean – Megatron, really?

"You mean to tell me you have no respect for our great leader? How shameful." Tarantulas clicks in feigned disappointment. "But I suppose he's just not canine enough for you..."

Blackarachnia lets out a screech that would have blown out any other comm link. *Eat slag and get out of my head, freak.*

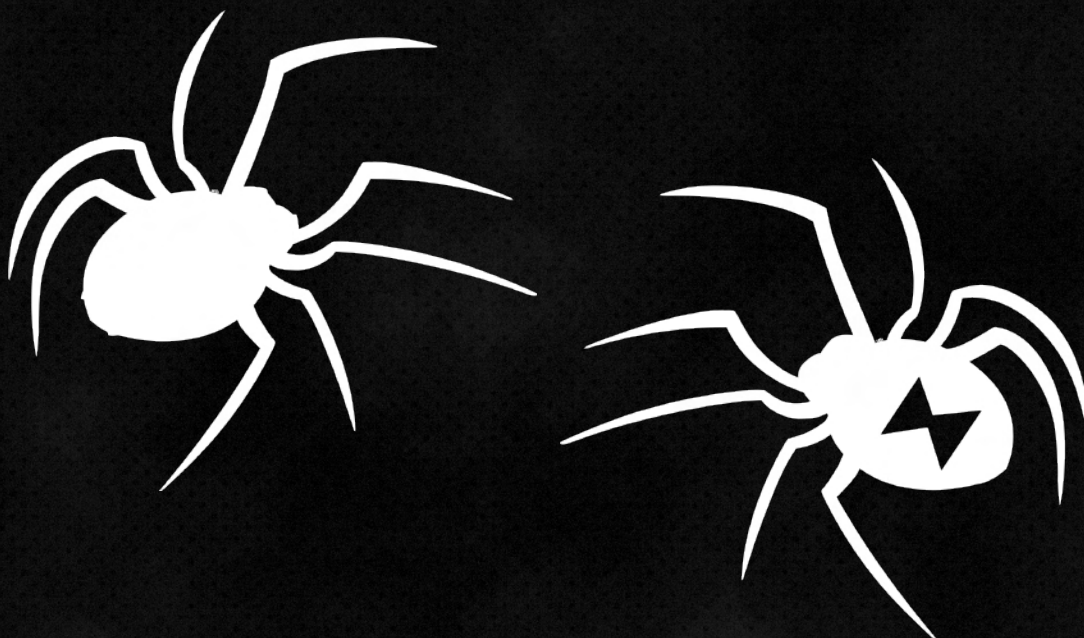
Circuitry shifts and the web trembles, and Blackarachnia has done her best to quickly impose security measures on the deeper parts of her programming. It's far too easily overridden, but Tarantulas lets her pretend for now. Drawing out the game is always more fun, anyway.

"Just don't forget your mission~!"

When she doesn't respond, Tarantulas hums to himself and minimizes their connection. What Blackarachnia lacks in reliability, she makes up for in general competency—as one would expect from any of *his* creations. A little blackmail and a little cognitive puppeteering will go a long way.

And if she should meet her end at Dinobot's claws?

There are always more protoforms to retrofit to his liking.



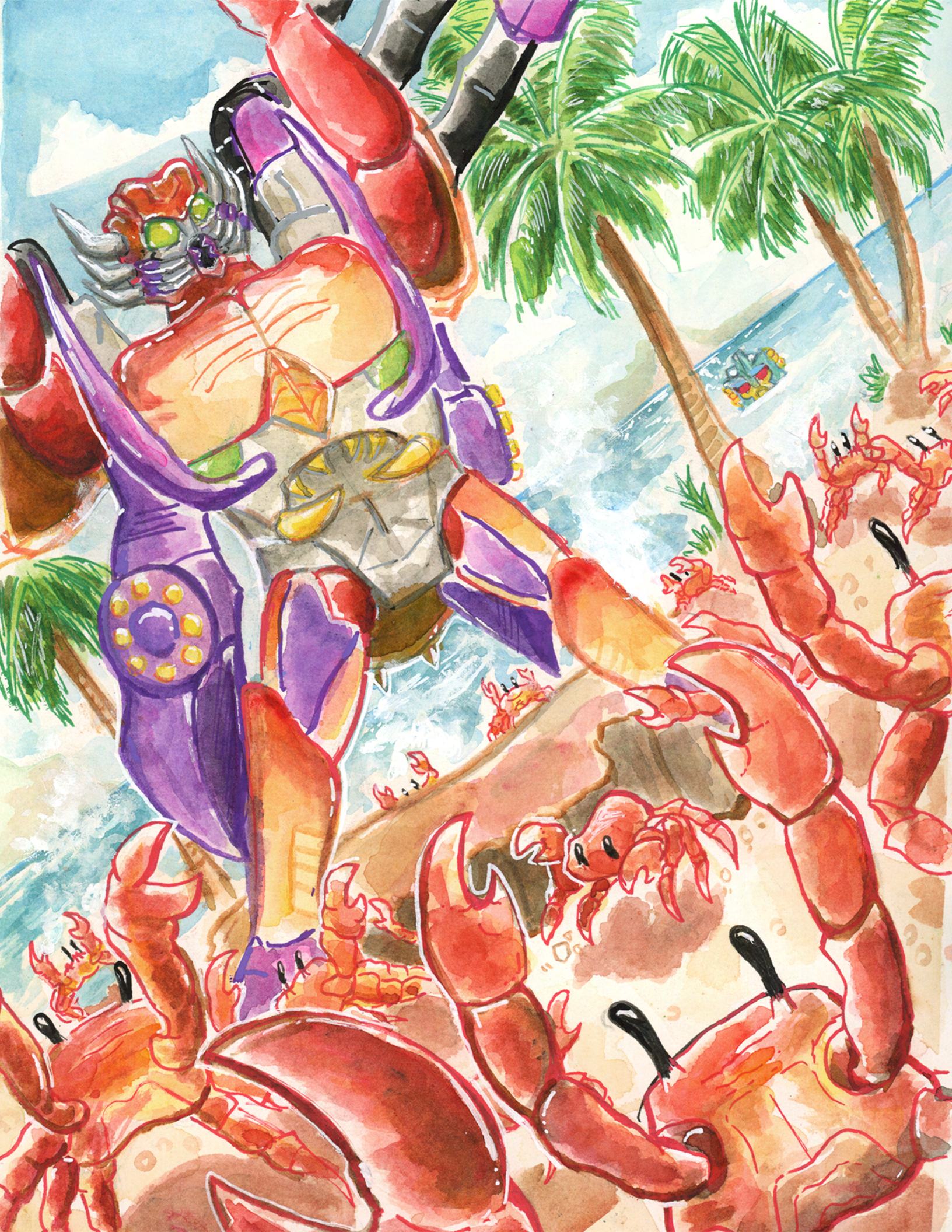




by Windy Drawallday









MAROONED

BY SUZIE

Well... Suppose there was no getting around it; He was *stuck* here.

He circles what's left of his starhopper, scrutinizing the strewn about bits of jagged metal and water logged circuitry. Useless, all of it... And to make matters worse, X was likely miles away by now. It was all too like him to perform a crushing blow and then leave him to *agonize* over picking up the pieces.

Depth Charge brings his pectoral fin down into a heavy flap, sharply turning himself away from the sight. Salvage was impossible, that much was certain. Best to just... take the loss on the chin, head back to shore, and *plan*. Figures.

All around him, this strange new world's oceans span out endlessly in every direction. Swimming would make his trip to shore longer, but he'd been a submersible his entire life, and as any water frame worth their salt would tell you; Being underwater clears the brain module.

Or, well... It used to.

He tries, and fails, to fight the urge to linger as he follows the dip in a rocky outcropping beneath him. The state of his starhopper was just another annoyance thrown onto a growing pile of disappointments. First, X had somehow gotten the drop on him. And then, as if that humiliation wasn't enough, he finds out that the Maximals put in charge of dealing with him simply *let* him join the Predacons. He would be pressed to think of any greater failures in this universe than the crew of the Axalon.

Reflexively, Depth Charge lashes his tail and strikes the ground beneath him, stirring up sand and spooking a young eel from its hide. He makes little note of it as it zips past him, though he does sympathize with it when it peeks its head back out. He was just as alien to it as it was to him, if not moreso. A strange creature in a strange land.

Yeah, he thinks. I'd give myself that look too.

Eventually, as the sun starts to set, the seafloor opens into a steep underwater valley. Its walls are wide enough to accommodate his hefty wingspan, barely. He could easily swim over it instead, but... Its current led to deeper waters, and the comforting weight of the ocean could act as a compress for his wounded pride. So, he lets the pull take him.

-

This valley has its fair share of twists and turns, but Depth Charge manages it with ease. Briefly, he brings up his internal HUD to confirm that he's still heading in the right direction, and pauses when he notices that his comm had several missed calls. From Primal, no doubt...

What was it he had said to him earlier? "*We could use your help.*" That definitely got a chuckle out of him. It would be fantastic if any of *these* pit forsaken Maximals could tell him something he didn't know already. Could use his help? Yeah, that was painfully obvious, but it didn't mean he needed to give it to them. Not now.

You see, there is a distinction to be made between the concepts of *loneliness*, and *solitude*. Some might call him lonely, sure, but he didn't see it that way. Like the reef shark that idly swam across the lip of the valley, or the sea turtle that meticulously picked sponges from its walls, he preferred to go about his business by himself. It meant he got more *done*. It was *why* he got more done, in fact.

He clears his message history and shuts his comms down again. Why weigh himself down with unnecessary baggage? He already had plenty to begin with.

Suddenly, his proximity sensors bring him out of his head before he can frustrate himself further. Soon, the current he'd been gliding along would get stronger, and he'd be scraped along the edges of the canyon as it took him through an ever thinning passageway. Best to get out now while he still could. A shame, the monotony was finally starting to ease his nerves.

It only takes a couple of flaps of his fins for him to reorient himself, briefly fighting the current as he escapes its grasp. A shame to go, yes, but he takes care to remind himself of what monotony leads to; *Complacency*. And he could not afford complacency, not when the other people on this planet were performing the way they were.

Complacency is what got you here. Complacency is what got you hurt. Complacency is what got your starhopper wrecked. Optics up, stay alert, don't be caught lacking again.

As he brings himself out of the valley and onto the surrounding sea floor, Depth Charge notes how different it feels. He's able to stretch his fins out properly, but it's *open*. Very open. In the middle distance, he watches a long, silvery fish pursue another, and he feels something in his spark chamber shift as it strikes its prey with remarkable accuracy. Barracudas, efficient predators in a space where attacks can come from... any angle.

Optics up, stay alert, don't be caught lacking again. He could be anywhere.

Better look around, it had been awhile. His computer failed him earlier, so better to rely on more practical methods.

Slowly, Depth Charge inches himself back towards the relative safety that the edge of the valley provided, and strains all of his internal systems. His audials at full power, sonar stretched as far as it could go, EMF prickling for slight magnetic changes. He waits, and he waits, and he waits...

And yet, where his paranoia expects the worst, he is instead rewarded with whalesong. No X, just... a family, and a talkative one at that. His gears unwind, fans stop whirring, and he sets himself northward again.

Stop being an idiot. Keep moving. You're wasting daylight.

-

Night fell quicker than expected on this planet. He could keep moving all he wanted, but less stimuli in the dark made it easier for him to lose focus again.

He knew what needed to be done here, and he knew what lengths he'd go to do it. But... he couldn't help but think, how long had he been existing like this? Tense, always looking over his shoulder. It wasn't the greatest life to live, but what other options did he have? He felt trapped, constantly.

The valley he'd been following seemed to finally come to an end, and he slows as he stares out over the dropoff that now laid before him. He wasn't far from shore now, so he starts his crossing with little thought. *Keep moving.*

However, he's only a few yards out when he notices movement beneath him. Immediately, anxiety races through his fuel lines, and he regrets not being more careful. He turns himself downwards in a hurry, trying to make sense of the strange shape. X was quickly ruled out, it was too... *graceful*? Not a whale, or a sunfish either... He focuses his optics on the target, just before he is overwhelmed.

You see, a group of manta rays is called a fever, presumably because of how they move when they congregate together on migration. A rolling boil of mottled black and white bodies, gently pushing up out of the darkness to chase the moonlight. They stay closely knit, riding each others slipstreams as they take each mile, and take them *together*.

Depth Charge is surrounded, consumed, by an ocean of his kin in moments, with their fins brushing against him in soft greeting. Once again, he finds himself fighting a current, but this one doesn't seem to mind. Graceful, and gracious too.

He wasn't usually one for epiphanies, but it was hard to not feel like the universe was trying to tell him something at this point. Unfortunately, he hadn't been listening, until now. He remains still, rocking in the void that was left after the fever moves on. Gone, as quickly as they came... There's a familiar ache in his chest.

Manta rays were social creatures, and Depth Charge was already turning out to be a *horrible* manta ray.

"*We could use your help.*" Primal had said, and he was right. He didn't intend to go back at first, but... Perhaps he'd lost where the line between solitude and loneliness really was after all.

He was marooned on an island of his own making, saying no to a way out like an idiot. He vents a sigh as he's jostled by the waves, and decides that maybe, just *maybe*, he'd take a note from the book of the whales and the rays. He'd go back to the Maximals when the time was right, but not a second sooner. He had a job to do, and he *would* see it done right eventually.

Eventually could be any time though. So, for now, he'd offline his optics, and listen to the whalesong. Because as any water frame worth their salt would tell you; Being underwater clears the brain module.







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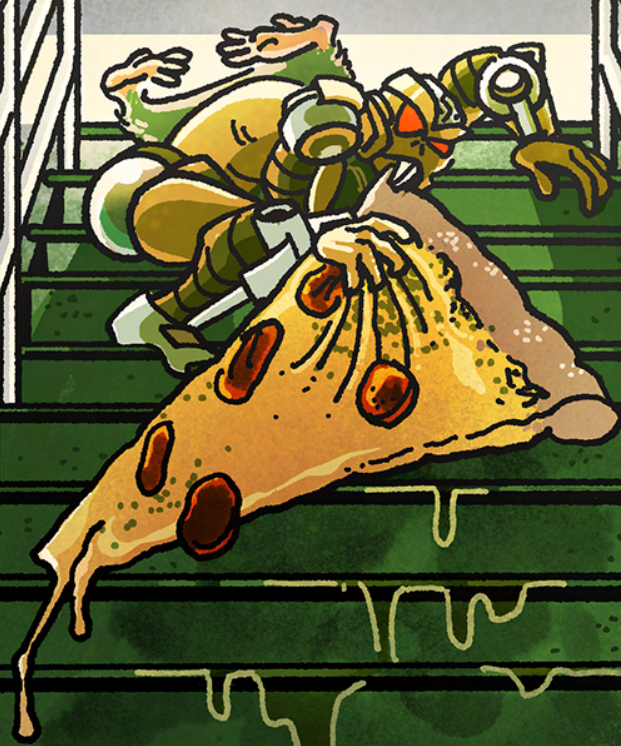




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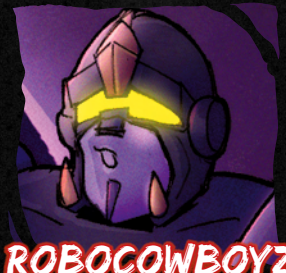
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